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Future Selves: Career choices of young disabled people

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RESEARCH:

There is growing recognition that gaining the views of young people is crucial for understanding issues that affect their lives. However, to date, very little is known about the way in which disabled children, make sense of their identities, and create a sense of their past and their imagined futures over time. This three year study, funded by the European Social Fund, and conducted by Dr Sonali Shah and colleagues at the University of Nottingham, used various methods to explore how physically disabled students, in full-time special or mainstream education, make choices concerning their occupational futures. It identified the factors that shape their educational and career related choices and chances, and explored how social relations, social processes, and social policies influenced the extent to which their aspirations were achieved. This study presents disabled children and young people as critical social actors who are telling their own stories of how social structures and processes shape their choices and aspirations for their future selves. It illustrates the importance of consulting children and young people about issues concerning their lives, and not rely solely on adults' conceptions of childhood.

The young disabled people's experiences and views can be used to develop a new flexible system which offers the benefits of mainstream and special education, and facilitates young disabled people's self-determination to make choices to participate in and contribute to their independent futures.

The research found that:

- Disability influenced young people's aspirations in positive and negative ways. Young people considered it to inform their future career choice and facilitate their successful performance rather than hinder it. However disabling barriers did cause some young people to reject original career aspirations and redirect their goals. These barriers included society's portrayal of occupations being unavailable to disabled people.
 - *...I had a few problems with the college and that...Discrimination... they didn't help a lot...they kept just avoiding it, avoiding it and stuff, saying that um, um I can't apply, and had to wait another a year or so, its ridiculous really, so I just gave up on them... so I gradually began to like photography and am going to X [special FE college] (Fiona, age 18)*
 - *I've always wanted to go into journalism 'cos I read magazines and newspapers and stuff and I've always wanted to like write my own articles and that... I'd like to write about the problems disabled people face and er, um what can be done about it and um how people should like realise what it's like and not be horrible...(Mike, age 15)*
- Young people identified their family as important to the development of their aspirations in a number of ways: 1) by being role models; 2) by providing support, guidance and advice; 3) by being a source of information about educational and occupational opportunities; 4) by supporting activities related to career aspirations; 5) by being unsupportive and negative. Role models were likely to be family members of the same gender as the young disabled people.
 - *I heard from my cousin from London, he's like, he's an IT expert, I think he's like one expert {on a team}...he says the money is good, he can fix computers, any problem they've got with computers...My uncle [gave me the idea of becoming an IT expert]...he is...he did get a good qualification... 'I've got one older brother...he goes to college, does IT the same (Ikky, age 15)*
- Positive disabled role models are important. Only one person mentioned a role model who is disabled. Several young disabled people, especially girls, were enthusiastic to learn more about disabled people in professional roles. They were interested to know more about the disabled researcher in terms of how she had achieved her personal and professional choices in a disabling society.
 - *I always say I am going to do this [work with children]... I can do it 'cos one of my friends has got a disabled sister-in-law She's a lot worse off than me. I've never met her but I can picture her. And she's working for a very rich company apparently... every year there's disabled person working in the outreach office (Zoe, age 17)*

- New choices were never too far away from old ones: When young disabled people had to redirect their original goals they were likely to choose a different job but broadly in the same occupational field as originally aspired, thus still within their skills and interests, and qualities.

- School experience can limit employment opportunities. Young disabled people from mainstream school ages 14 and over were more likely to have clearly defined goals and express an understanding of the requirements for reaching their goals. Young disabled people, under age 17 and based in special education, were more likely to have wide ranging goals. These may be because the latter have very limited opportunities to do work experience (if at all) and thus could face greater obstacles in testing their skills and abilities in real-world work settings
 - *'whilst it is almost easy to find people to provide work placement, while it is easy to find places that are accessible in terms of the physical environment, in terms of providing any care needs that the individual may require during the day – it is very difficult... In the past, when the school had a lot of staffing, we used to be able to ring up people to go out and we used to be able to use residential staff, extra staff to support that. At the moment we haven't got that staffing capacity.'* (Deputy Head Teacher of Special School)

- Some young people turned to gender atypical goals when their aspirations were thwarted by disabling structures in education and employment.

- Some young people identified the lack of academic orientation and limited curriculum in special schools as restricting their learning opportunities and subsequent employment prospects. However they preferred the barrier-free environment of special schools, which promoted social acceptance, as opposed to the unsupportive environment of mainstream schools.
 - *'I lived in Africa, it was [mainstream school], they just couldn't cope with me they, they just didn't have the facilities that they've got in a special school...my mum taught me to read and write at home...Here [in special school] I'm supported to do what I want'* (Hannah, special, age 18)
 - *'the government just ain't got a clue, cos they think 'Oh the special schools will be out in a minute' but, but when you see pupils like some of the ones here, they wouldn't be alive if they didn't have special schools'* (Tyson, special, age 19)
 - *'they didn't seem to push you. Like we didn't do A-Levels or anything... I would have liked to have a chance at some proper tests and see how far I got see how clever I was you know...they don't seem to push you at special school'* (Schumacher, special, age 18)

- Just under two thirds of the young people aspired to traditionally gender typical careers: young disabled people's aspirations seem to be more a reflection of their gender than their disability status.
 - *'I want to be a singing superstar that shines very bright' (Checka, age 15)*
 - *I've got quite a few choices. I've got dance choreographer, and a singer or an actress. Drama's my favourite subject I think I'm quite good at drama' (Millie, age 13)*
 - *I want to go to a performing college to do acting and singing... My favourite subjects are dance and drama... I have always wanted to do singing since I was really little (Jenny, age 14)*

- Other young people chose to put up with the physical and social barriers of mainstream education to ensure they received learning opportunities on a par with non-disabled peers. Further they saw special schools as reinforcing negative difference and isolating young people from the real world.
 - *'I've seen special schools but I don't really like them cos I don't really like seeing all the people cos like, they can't talk... I don't think they do languages at special school' (Sabrina, age 14)*
 - *'I've never...I've looked around them [special schools] but I've never actually gone... No I don't think it would be the same because I want it to be a mixture of people not just people in chairs like me... I'd feel quite quiet 'cos I wouldn't be able to say my feelings because people might be worse off than me' (Mille, age 12)*

- Young disabled people and educational professionals did not always share the same views on educational inclusion. While young disabled people reported being excluded from school trips, some educational professionals were sure that strategies were in place to avoid this.
 - *I haven't been allowed to go on some of the trips because they're not accessible to wheelchairs' (Sam, age 17, mainstream)*
 - *I'm not sure if any of our wheelchair users haven't been allowed to go on our trips. Since I've been here I think they've all gone on the trip but might not have accessed everything on the trip...the Peak Surprise view in D is the main one, it is just not wheelchair-accessible at all to get to the top to look at the peak. We have suggested to them to take a video camera (6th formers go to lend a hand) and to film the views from the peak and to show it to those that are not able to go there. The bus companies we use should all be wheelchair accessible. Sometimes if they've not been able to get on the bus we have had wheelchair users that have had to go with a teacher in the car – but they're not getting the atmosphere of being with all the friends on the bus. We've now got that list of bus companies and, touch wood, it will happen.' (SENCO, mainstream)*

- Mainstream education provides a wide range of academic and learning opportunities but lacks the support and facilities required for disabled students with high-level support needs, to take advantage of them.
 - *'I got into a comprehensive but it had a unit but I had to spend most of the time in and that was just like the special school... I went to the occasional English, history, music, R.E but it was occasional so by the time I went again I couldn't catch up because I had missed out on so much they didn't expect me to do the ordinary work.'* (Maggie, age 19)

- Work experience is not offered to young disabled people on equal terms to their non-disabled peers. Limited access within mainstream educational and employment structures means that disabled students, especially those with high-level support needs, have to accept placements from employers who can guarantee an accessible environment rather than meet their career aspirations.
 - *'I've had three weeks work experience while I've been here...2 weeks at a special college doing various bits err and bobs there, but mainly to do with building my computer skills more than, more than to do with future career I think'* (Steve, 18,)

- The use of teaching assistants in mainstream schools was often criticised by young disabled people for impeding their social and academic choices and reinforcing the disabled/non-disabled divide. Professionals perceived them as important to young people's inclusion.
 - *'I don't like having a TA around me all the time because I want some of my own space... its not really fair on my friends having to sit next to a TA all the time when I want to sit with them'* (Millie, age 12, mainstream)

▪ Young disabled people's ideas for change –

The final question in the interviews with the young people was, *'if you were given the power to change anything in the world what would it be?'*. Their responses can be divided into 2 categories: society and individual. This refers to the young people's perceptions of what needs to change, the society or the individual, thus in line with the social and medical perspectives of disability.

A few of the young people were keen to change things at an individual level, in relation to their impairment, thus adopting a medical model perspective. For instance, Alan who was 13 years old and at a mainstream school had gradually become a full-time wheelchair user as a consequence of a deteriorating muscle

wasting condition which caused his legs to slowly weaken and eventually stop functioning. When asked, if he had the power to change anything, he said it would be his *'...ability to walk again, that'd be so good I walked until year 2 then stopped, as it wasn't convenient.'*

Similarly Harry, also a wheelchair user, recalls how he was ambulant before a hip dislocation, and would like the opportunity to walk again:

'I used to be able to walk... got CP as well, I used to go to the school that would exercise my muscles and stuff... I used to be able to walk through parallel bars... but because my hip's gone,... I'd like to change it back into being able to walk'

Jenny, like Alan and Harry, had lost her ability to walk although still has a positive recollection of these times. If she could turn back the clock she would like to:

Not to be in a wheelchair, I used to in my old school walk around on crutches but I had a hip operation and it went wrong so now I'm always in a wheelchair

However, unlike Alan and Harry, Jenny's quote suggests that there is a need to change health care services and treatment to be able to achieve her goal, rather than herself.

Changing society to reduce inequalities and disabling barriers was reflected in many of the young disabled people's 'ideas for change'. Their last words referred to how they would like things to change at a societal level which could make an informed contribution to the development of policy for all young disabled people, not just themselves.

Sabrina, aged 14, herself, has been a victim of disability related prejudice and discrimination from young people and adults within and outside the school environment. However she adopts a social model perspective in that she strongly believes that members of society should function together to succeed, as opposed to segregated minority groups, *'I would join up white and Asian people together as a unit'*. Further, she perceives discrimination such as disablism is a problem with societal attitudes not individual attributes and thus would like a society where:

'people do not to look down on people with disability... cos I don't think I could change my disability... The attitude towards disabled people isn't that great at the moment...like, those people, as you walk by. go "ah bless her" and that's really gets on my nerves cos they think you're like paralysed but we're not we're gonna fight back'

Hannah and Schumacher, both aged 18, also felt that there was an urgent need to change public attitudes to disability to enable young disabled people to achieve full citizenship, on par to their non-disabled peers, in mainstream society:

'[I would] change people's attitudes probably... if I went shopping people would talk to the person that I was with and ignore me, they'd say like "how old is she" and I'd feel like saying "I can talk you know".' (Hannah)

'it would be the way me and my friends are all looked at... For example, in my town at home I've had lots of people come up, just stand and look at me, and I'm like "do you have a question for me?" and they're like "no"' (Schumacher)

Several of the young people had insider perspectives, of special and mainstream education which they explored to present ideas about how to move to a more physically, socially and educationally inclusive system for themselves and other disabled students:

'I would change mainstream schools to make it better for other kids by having more staff, more helpers who know about disability, they could go on lifting and handling course. Also there should be more accessible toilets.' (Cathy, aged 14)

'I suppose that I would make sure that sort of disabled people get um an absolute equal chance to able-bodied people um that young people get educated about disabilities better in school' (Sam, aged 17)

'I know this sounds a bit weird but instead of lifts in this school, I think they should have ramps ... because like lifts go two miles an hour as it is and you get, get to your lesson really really late' (Nay, aged 14)

Finally, Mike concludes the research with the following message:

'I'd make it easier for any disabled person not to feel left out and excluded, because we're not freaks or anything, we're just the same [as non-disabled people] except they haven't got as much um, you know, they haven't got as much limitations'

KEY CONCLUSIONS

- Sometimes young disabled people have to compromise their own aspirations as a consequence of disabling social structures which restrict their horizon for action, and limit their opportunities to contribute to the development of their future selves. Young disabled people need support and encouragement to turn their aspirations into real opportunities, and dismantle obstacles that may get in their way.
- The views and experiences of young people, with physical impairments, in this study creates a different story from the one often told by policy makers and professionals. Adults do not always prepare disabled young people for the same futures as they envisage for their non-disabled children.
- Young disabled people are critical social actors, and with the right support and guidance, are able to make realistic decisions about their futures.
- Listening to the voices of young disabled people and their allies about what they need and want could make a significant contribution to the reduction of disabling barriers and bring benefits to an increasingly global labour market with a diverse customer base.
- Having access to positive disabled role models, to see how disabled people interact with their environment is also important for young people to develop a positive disability identity. One of strategies for change might be to encourage disabled people into high-status professions and avoid looking at impairment as a negative factor.
- The current educational opportunities available for young disabled people are thwarted by barriers which cause young disabled people to compromise their aspirations. Educational policies for disabled children are driven by non-disabled professionals who, again, try to make important decisions concerning the education of disabled children without consulting them.

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